

## Communication Research in Spanish Universities

### *La investigación en comunicación en las universidades españolas*

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#### **Abstract:**

This article presents the results of the project "Map of Research in Communication in Spanish Universities from 2007 to 2018" referring to the research methodology. Specifically, it gives an account of the research techniques that have been used in the main scientific practices carried out in Spain in the last 10 years: R + D + i projects, scientific articles published in indexed journals and doctoral theses in the field of communication. The conclusions confirm that content analysis is the most widely used technique in scientific practices in the field of communication, although other social research techniques are also used to a lesser extent: discourse analysis, in-depth interviews and surveys.

#### **Keywords:**

Meta-research; Research methodology; Communication; research techniques; Content Analysis

#### **Resumen:**

*Se presentan en este artículo los resultados del proyecto “Mapa de la Investigación en Comunicación en las Universidades Españolas de 2007 a 2018” referidos a la metodología de las investigaciones. En concreto se da cuenta de las técnicas de investigación que se han utilizado en las principales prácticas científicas realizadas en España en los últimos 10 años: proyectos I+D+i, artículos científicos publicados en revistas indexadas y tesis doctorales del ámbito de la comunicación. Las conclusiones permiten confirmar al análisis de contenido como la técnica más utilizada en las prácticas científicas del campo de la comunicación, aunque también se utilizan, en menor proporción, otras técnicas de investigación social: análisis del discurso, entrevistas en profundidad y encuestas.*

#### **Palabras clave:**

*Meta-investigación; Metodología de investigación; Comunicación; Técnicas de investigación; Análisis de contenido*

## 1. Introduction

An in-depth study of research in the field of communication and, specifically, of the methodology used, is useful for finding out how studies in this area are carried out and for determining any possible specifics in terms of methodology. For that reason, this piece of work has, as its aim, to discover the research techniques used between 2007 and 2018 in Spain in the area of communication.

This study, in particular, is part of the “Mapa de la Investigación en Comunicación en las Universidades Españolas de 2007 a 2018” (PGC2018-093358-B-I00, Ministry of Science and Innovation) project which offers up an archive of research in communication carried out in Spain from 2007 to 2018<sup>1</sup>, and which recorded the R+D+I projects, the articles published in indexed journals, the papers presented at the congresses of the Spanish Communication Researchers’ Association (AEIC) and the doctoral theses on communication defended at Spanish universities. In the Mapcom project, in addition to the archive of pieces of scientific work, we analyse certain identification variables regarding the production, authorship, type of objective and methodology. In this study, only those research techniques used in projects, doctoral theses and research material published in indexed journals have been analyzed, whereas, those which were presented at congresses have been omitted since most do not constitute scientific research and, consequently, the techniques used are not specified (Gómez-Escalonilla e Izquierdo Iranzo, 2020).

The analysis of research in communication already has a certain history and boasts references such as: Almirón and Reig, 2007; Martínez Nicolás and Saperas, 2011; Fernández Quijada and Masip, 2013; Rodríguez Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique, 2018. As regards methodology, noteworthy references include: López Rabadán and Vicente, 2011; Ferran, Guallar, Abadal and Server, 2017; Tramullas, 2020 or Caffarel, Gaitán, Piñuel and Lozano, 2018, the latter being included in the previous Mapcom project and covering the period up to 2013. This piece of work brings the data up to date (2018) and uses the previous study as its starting point. That study states that the main research technique was “the analysis of documents, preferably those of a quantitative nature” (Caffarel, Ortega, Gaitán, 2017). The present study, then, is based on the hypothesis that document-based techniques - mainly Content Analysis - are the most-used ones in communication research in Spain. This technique analyses messages from a quantitative perspective.

## 2. Methodology

This study follows the methodology used in the project of which it is part: mapping and carrying out a census of scientific studies, differentiating between research projects, doctoral theses, research articles and papers presented at the congresses of the AEIC, the latter not being analyzed in this case. Each research piece required a different methodological strategy to obtain data.

To gather information about the competitive projects, the Ministry of Science and Innovation was contacted and the information obtained was completed with information

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mapcom.es>

from universities, main researchers and lists of accepted projects. The full list of accepted projects and those whose field and objective were related to communication were selected. The census of communication projects between 2007 and 2018 generated a universe of 250 accepted projects.

In the case of research articles, firstly, those scientific journals which appear among the first according to the h-index designed by *Google Scholar*: *Comunicar*, *Revista Latina*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Estudios del Mensaje periodístico*, *Telos*, *Zer*, *Trípodos*, *El Profesional de la información* e *Historia and Comunicación Social* were chosen. Of all the articles published in the nine journals over the course of those 11 years, only the ones which are the result of R+D+I research projects - some 406 articles - have been chosen.

For doctoral theses, those which were registered in either Communication Science or Information Science Faculties during the given period were selected. This information was obtained from the Teseo database and the number of theses read between 2007 and 2018 was 2,784.

Altogether, some 3,440 contributions have been recorded and they make up the body of this piece of research. For each of them, an analysis register was created and even though the Mapcom project considered more variables, here we are only going to consider those which refer specifically to research techniques, cross-referenced with the variables which identify the type of contribution, as no significant differences have been recorded when it comes to year of publication or gender of the main author, researcher or doctoral candidate who carried out the research.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Techniques used in communication research

In this study, we researched the research techniques used in the studies carried out in Spain in the area of communication between 2007 and 2018. Although there are differences in terms of methodology, a discrepancy which explains the scarce research into its use (Martínez Nicolás, 2020), the authors of reference in the field of methodology in this area have been followed: Wimmer and Dominick (1996), Gaitán and Piñuel (1998) or Igartua (2006) and what scientific studies state when it comes to differentiating one technique from another.

The analysis of the 3,440 scientific studies registered between 2007 and 2018 makes it possible to identify which research techniques are used in the field of communication. Of the document-based techniques, content analysis, discourse analysis and document analysis have been used. Experimental techniques have also been used, in addition to open interviews, group techniques and surveys. To a lesser extent, other techniques have also been used, most notably: systematic observation, peer observation and self-observation. The following table shows the main research techniques by the scientific practices analyzed.

**Table 1**

*Research techniques used in communication research*

Technique	N	%
Content analysis	1001	34
Discourse analysis	541	18
Document-based analysis	609	21
Surveys	429	15
Interviews	135	5
Experiments	99	3
Group techniques	118	4

### 3.1.1. The open, or in-depth, interview

The results of the study confirm the use of the in-depth interview in scientific studies in the area of communication. The in-depth interview may be defined as a conversation between two people for the purpose of research, in other words, to obtain data. Merton was the first to use the interview as a research tool, establishing its main characteristics as: Merton and Kendall (1946, p. 545) “No direction: most answers should be spontaneous and free rather than forced or induced; Specifics: encourage the interviewee to give specific answers rather than vague or general; Range: probe the gamut of feelings of the subject and, Depth and personal context: to bring out the subject’s affective or appraising impressions” (Vallés, 2007, p. 21).

In the field of research of communication, the in-depth interview was used in 135 studies making up 5% of the total number of research projects carried out in the last ten years.

### 3.1.2. Group techniques

In-depth interviews are qualitative techniques, as are group techniques, and both are based on what the subject says, the former when subjects are interviewed one by one and the latter, when working with groups. There are, depending on the approach, different group techniques: focus groups, Delphi groups or even Philips 66, but with this approach they have all been grouped together as they essentially have the common feature of being “non-directed techniques which have the aim of the controlled production of a discourse from a group of subjects who are brought together for a limited period of time, in order to debate a certain topic which has been proposed by the researcher” (Vallaso de Lopes, 1992, p. 200).

In research in the field of communication, group techniques, especially focus groups, have been used in 118 studies, accounting for 4% of the total.

### 3.1.3. Surveys

In-depth interviews and group techniques are based on asking subjects questions, using a qualitative strategy in their approach to the objective of the study, however, a quantitative strategy may also be used for the analysis of the data given by subjects during the encounter, such as in surveys. “A survey is a piece of research carried out with a sample group of subjects who are representative of a wider collective. It takes place in the context of everyday life, using standardized interviewing procedures, with the aim of obtaining quantitative measurements of a wide variety of objective and subjective features of the population” (García Ferrando, 2000, p. 123).

In the area of communication, surveys have been used in 429 scientific research studies, accounting for 15% of the total. It should be pointed out that the survey was the most-used research strategy in the practice of social research, particularly sociology (Anguita *et al*, 2003). As such, its relatively minor use in communication science may be characteristic of the methodology which is applied in this discipline.

### 3.1.4. Document-based Techniques

In addition to being able to access the subjects being studied, research can also access documents to obtain data. Having said that, document analysis can be done in different ways: either favouring a quantitative strategy which means quantifying objective dimensions as in content analysis, or in a more qualitative way, interpreting the messages, as with discourse analysis - although it can also be carried out in a more conventional manner, using document analysis as a means of obtaining primary data.

Although these three procedures do exist, not all the scientific community recognises all three of them as being distinct from each other. Wimmer and Dominick (1996) omit discourse analysis in the table of methods and research techniques in communication which they deal with in their manual. Similarly, Sayago (2014) considers discourse analysis a quantitative and qualitative technique for studying messages. This lack of recognition for one technique or another, which, in most cases, only affects the terminology, is due to the fact that the different research techniques appeared in different contexts characterized by a more positivist, and, consequently, more quantitative approach, or a more phenomenological one which is closer to qualitative approaches. The North-American tradition of Mass Communication Research has tended to follow quantitative positions and in that context content analysis is more prominent, whereas in Europe a more linguistic type of analysis is starting to be used to research media content, feeding from the structuralism of Saussure or Jakobson or the semiotics of Barthes or Greimas. As such, the methodologies of text analysis use strategies which are more akin to discourse analysis. This duality between quantitative and qualitative which has permeated the methodological debate in social science is being overtaken in favour of a greater recognition of both approaches and even their joint use, as put forward by Vicente (2009) using methodological triangulation between content analysis and discourse analysis.

Whatever the case, in this piece of work on the research techniques employed in scientific practice at Spanish universities between 2007 and 2018, there are studies

which use documents to obtain data, sometimes favouring a document-based strategy be that quantitative or qualitative. Content analysis, which may be defined following Berelson as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of expressed communication content” (1952, p. 18) has been used in 29% of cases, with 1,000 studies of the total 3,440 which were analyzed. It is the most-used technique in communication research. In that sense, it coincides with other studies, for example, Martínez Nicolás, Saperas and Carrasco (2019) or Rodríguez Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique for whom content analysis is also the most-used technique albeit being applied “in 9.4% of cases” (2018, p. 236).

It is much more difficult to talk about Discourse Analysis since it does not refer to a specific research technique but rather a whole discipline with many scientists. Abril (2009) also addresses this issue, stating that “discourse analysis deals with a collection of methodologies aimed at the study of the production, circulation and interpretation of meaning in specific communication contexts”. If we consider, fundamentally, media studies, a total of 541 research studies have been produced in the last 10 years, accounting for 15.7% of the total.

To content analysis and discourse analysis can be added document analysis as a technique for the production of primary data. Document analysis is not limited to the documentation process as carried out by any research project in order to contextualize the subject, bring it up to date and interpret and discuss the results obtained, but rather it uses this access to secondary sources in order to obtain primary data, carrying out analysis and interpretation using available databases or statistics. This area has grown recently as a consequence of the boom in big data. Document analysis has been used in 609 studies, making up 18% of the total.

Document-based techniques are the most-used ones in communication research according to the findings of our study, which is feasible, bearing in mind that the communication products, themselves, such as newspapers, magazines, websites or audiovisual records may be considered “documents” and in order to study and analyse them, document-based research techniques are the most appropriate.

### 3.1.5. Experiment-based Techniques

Whereas document-based techniques are used - and considerably so - in communication research, the same cannot be said of experiment-based techniques. In experiments, the researcher “uses certain variables and then observes the reaction of participants in others”, (Igartua, 2006, p. 329). These techniques are particularly appropriate for research into causality, the effect of something specific, in fact, initial research into the effect of the media used this experimental technique in conjunction with surveys, as, for example, the famous *The People’s Choice. How the Voter Makes Up his Mind in the Presidential Campaign* led by Lazarsfeld in 1944.

Despite its use in the first years of research into this field, in the years which were studied for this piece of research, in the context of Spain, it only makes up 3% of all research, with fewer than 100 cases.

### 3.2. Research techniques used by different contributions

The analysis carried out previously made it possible to identify the use of the different research techniques by the total number of scientific studies analyzed, although it is possible to distinguish certain preferences in the use of one or others based on the type of contribution in question: doctoral thesis, articles published in indexed journals or competitive R+D+I projects and to compare the methodological solutions by this type of contribution.

#### 3.2.1. Techniques used in doctoral thesis in communication

Between 2007 and 2018, 2,784 doctoral theses in communication have been read in Spain. As can be seen in Table 2, the most common technique is content analysis, which has been used in 757 theses, accounting for 27% of all theses, nearly one in three. Document techniques are the most used, with more than half of all theses using them. Of the ones which are not document-based, surveys score highly, followed by interviews, registering 10% and 11%. Experimental and group techniques are used on very few occasions.

**Table 2**

*Research techniques used in Doctoral Theses in Communication*

Techniques	N	%
Content analysis	757	27
Discourse analysis	476	17
Document analysis	473	17
Surveys	316	11
Interviews	280	10
Experiments	77	3
Group techniques	81	3
N/A	324	11

#### 3.2.2. Techniques used in articles from indexed journals

From 2007 to 2018, a total of 406 articles on communication by Spanish authors from competitive projects were published in the most important indexed journals in Spain. On 40 occasions, the technique used has not been identified and, of the others, the one which is used most is, once again, content analysis - one out of every three. Overall, however, when compared to doctoral theses, fewer articles use the qualitative document technique - only 30 articles based on some type of discourse analysis, making up 7% of all indexed articles.



Having said that, document analysis is used - almost one quarter of articles use this technique for obtaining primary data, albeit more than other techniques which are identified - both surveys and interviews score around 10% with experiments and group techniques trailing far behind.

**Table 3**

*Research techniques used in indexed articles*

Techniques	N	%
Content analysis	142	35
Discourse analysis	30	7
Document analysis	93	23
Surveys	54	13
Interviews	31	8
Experiments	3	1
Group techniques	12	5
N/A	41	10

### 3.2.3. Techniques used in competitive projects in communication

250 competitive projects in the area of communication have been recorded and the techniques used have been identified for all of them. In fact, there are more techniques used than projects revealing the use of more than one research technique. This may be logical given that these are ambitious and complex research projects. According to the record of different research techniques used in competitive projects, the most-used technique is content analysis, as was the case in the previous examples. In these projects, content analysis - the main research technique - is followed by surveys.

This relation, which differs from that obtained in other types of scientific output, makes it possible to confirm that quantitative techniques take priority over qualitative ones, particularly with research projects. It is also the type of research which makes most use of in-depth interviews - 15% of projects - more than document analysis and discourse analysis. It is also the type of study which most uses experimental and group designs.

**Table 4**

*Research techniques used in competitive projects*

Techniques	N	%
Content analysis	102	31
Discourse analysis	35	10



Document analysis	43	13
Surveys	59	18
Interviews	51	15
Experiments	19	6
Group techniques	25	7

### 3.3. Comparison of different techniques by contribution

As stated in the previous section, there are different methodological patterns depending on their contribution, although in all of them the main technique is content analysis, as shown in Figure 1, even though that technique is not used in the same proportion. Doctoral theses are the scientific studies which use this type of analysis the least whereas indexed articles are the ones in which it is used most frequently.

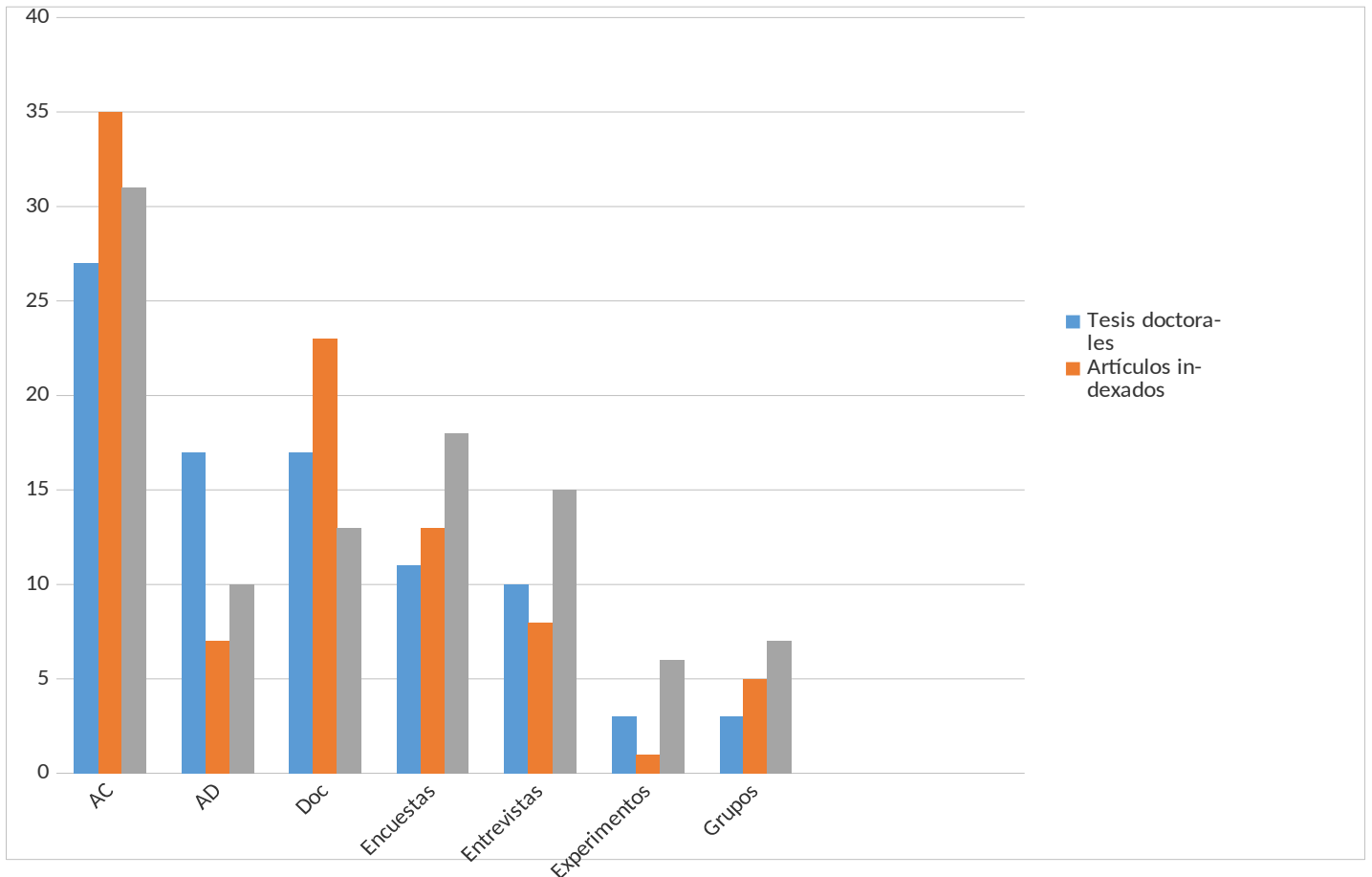
As regards the use of secondary data to obtain primary ones, it is the second methodological strategy in research published in indexed journals, however, it is not second in competitive projects where surveys and interviews follow content analysis. Therefore, competitive projects are the scientific studies in which document-based techniques are used least, with research in indexed articles using them the most.

In projects and articles, the third most popular technique used is discourse analysis and more in theses than in articles. It is perhaps the presence of doctoral candidates from Latin America in our faculties, who have achieved their doctorate during the period studied, which explains this tendency, with the influence of culturalist studies and the extension of the critical approach which promotes the use of critical analysis of discourse in media analysis, as pointed out by Mendizábal (2018).

In these three types of studies, the use of surveys is greater than that of in-depth interviews although a different pattern is observed depending on the contribution as the survey is used more in competitive projects and less in doctoral theses. This is, without doubt, because they are techniques which require a greater infrastructure and budget. It is worth highlighting that the use of in-depth interviews is not incompatible with this use of surveys, as, once again, competitive projects are the ones which use them most, with indexed articles being the ones which use them least. In all three cases, experimental or group techniques are used least but when they are used it is most likely to be in a research project.

**Figure 1**

*The proportion of research techniques used according to the different types of contribution*



#### 4. Conclusions

The Mapcom project, of which this study is part, has written up a census of scientific studies on communication carried out in Spanish universities between the years 2007-2018. The project provides the university community with this map of Spanish research ([www.mapcom.es](http://www.mapcom.es)) to diffuse the activity and publish its basic features. This register of all pieces of research carried out leads to the conclusion that communication research in Spain is characterized by being solid and consolidated. As far as research projects, doctoral theses and indexed scientific articles (the research projects studied in this piece of work) are concerned, the census totals 3,440 which is a considerable amount and one which reveals the strength of research into communication in Spain.

Out of that total, most are doctoral theses which were defended during the period at Spanish communication faculties. The figure of 2,784 theses is communication is considerably high, possibly as a result of the high number of theses defended during that period as a consequence of the change in legislation related to post-graduate studies which happened at that time. Whatever the reason, it is indicative of the prowess of

doctoral research in Spanish universities. The figure also augers well for the future of communication, given that doctoral theses are the first step on the road to a career in research.

Communication research in Spain is also reasonably strong at the highest levels of the scientific hierarchy. As far as the publication of articles in indexed journals is concerned, there have been 406 in the most prestigious ones and, given that the figure only accounts for those articles which come from competitive projects, it is a considerable quantity, bearing in mind that increased competition and heightened demand at a scientific level make it more and more difficult to publish. Higher levels of competition and demand are also characteristic of the allocation of competitive research projects - the highest indicator of research valence. In the period studied 250 projects were approved in the field of communication, which is indicative of the healthy state of research in that area.

However, the aims both of this particular contribution, and the project of which it is part are not only to find out about communication research in Spain at a quantitative level, but also to discover particular features. In the case of this piece or work, we studied the methodology used in these pieces of research. Once the different results concerning research techniques employed in the various contributions have been analyzed, we can conclude that this study offers, as its main conclusion, that even though communication sciences use the same methodological tools that are employed in the rest of social sciences, they do so in a different way to the others, indicating a distinguishing use in research methodology for this field of discipline. The main methodological peculiarity worth highlighting is the use of document techniques - in particular, content analysis - for investigating study subjects, thus confirming the initial hypothesis.

To a certain extent that may be logical given that content analysis is the technique which researches messages and is, therefore, a technique which is used for communication research. In fact, content analysis appeared to “research the content produced by communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18), as stated by one of its founders in the 1950s and, 70 years later, is still the most-used one for research into communication.

Communication content can also analyzed using discourse analysis, the qualitative technique which analyses and interprets the meaning of communication. In fact, it is one of the most-favoured techniques in the field of communication - more than other techniques used in social sciences, such as the survey or in-depth interview. However, it is relegated to a lower position compared to content analysis, precisely because of its qualitative nature, given that another of the conclusions of the study is the importance and preeminence of quantitative techniques over qualitative ones. There are more communication research studies based on content analysis and surveys than those based on discourse analysis, interviews or group techniques.

Another of the peculiarities of communication research is the scarce use of experiments, although in that sense it is similar to other social sciences, as opposed to the so-called “experimental” sciences, since, by definition, they base their research on this methodological technique.

If these conclusions are applied to communication research as a whole, the results of this study reveal certain methodological peculiarities depending on the contribution made: competitive project, article published in a research journal or doctoral thesis. In this way, it could be said that, even though in any type of research, content analysis and, in general, document-based strategies are the most commonly-used, they are not used in the same proportion. In projects, surveys, interviews, experiments and group techniques are used more than in other types of research, whereas discourse analysis is used to a larger extent in research work carried out in conjunction with doctoral studies.

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